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ALL LIFE IN A LIFE

His father had a large family
Of girls and boys, and he was born and bred
In a barn or kind of cattle shed.
But he was a hardy youngster, and grew to be
A boy with eyes that sparkled like a rod
Of white-hot iron in the blacksmith shop
His face was ruddy like a rising moon,
And his hair was black as sheep's wool that is black,
And he had rugged arms and legs and a strong back,
And he had a voice half flute and half bassoon,
And from his toes up to his head's top
He was a man, simple but intricate;
And most men differ who try to delineate
His life and fate.

He never seemed ashamed
Of poverty or of his origin. He was a wayward child
Nevertheless, though wise and mild
And thoughtful; but when angered then he flamed
As fire does in a forge.
When he was ten years old he ran away
To be alone and watch the sea and the stars
At midnight from a mountain gorge.
When he returned his parents scolded him
And threatened him with bolts and bars.
Then they grew soft for his return, and gay,

And with their love would have enfolded him;
But even at ten years old he had a way
Of gazing at you with a look austère
Which gave his kin-folk fear.
He had no child-like love for father or mother,
Sister or brother;
They were the same to him as any other.
He was a little cold, a little queer.

His father was a laborer and now
They made the boy work for his daily bread.
They say he read
A book or two during these years of work.
But if there was a secret
Between the pages under the light of his brow
It came forth. And if he had a woman
In love or out of love, or a companion or a chum,
History is dumb.
So far as we know he dreamed and worked with hands,
And learned to know his genius's commands—
Or what is called one's daemon.

And this became at last the city's call.
He had now reached the age of thirty years,
And found a Dream of Life and a solution
For slavery of soul and even all
Miseries that flow from things material.
To free the world was his soul's resolution.

But his family had great fears
For him, knowing the evil
Which might befall him, seeing that the light
Of his own dream had blinded his mind's eyes.
They could not tell but what he had a devil.
But still, in their tears' despite
And warnings', he departed with replies
That when a man's genius calls him
He must obey no matter what befalls him.

What he had in his mind was growth
Of soul by watching,
And the creation of eyes
Over your mind's eyes to supervise
A clear activity and to ward off sloth.
What he had in his mind was scotching
And killing the snake of Hatred, and stripping the glove
From the hand of Hypocrisy, and quenching the fire
Of Falsehood and Unbrotherly Desire.
What he had in his mind was simply Love—
And it was strange he preached the sword and force
To establish Love, but it was not strange,
Since he did this, his life took on a change.
And what he taught seems muddled at its source
With moralizing and with moral strife;
For morals are merely the Truth diluted,
And sweetened up and suited
To the business and bread of Life.

And now this City was just what you'd find
A city anywhere—
A turmoil and a Vanity Fair,
A sort of heaven and a sort of Tophet.
There were so many leaders of his kind
The city didn't care
For one additional prophet.
He said some extravagant things
And planted a few stings
Under the rich man's hide.
And one of the sensational newspapers
Gave him a line or two for cutting capers
In front of the Palace of Justice and the Church.
But all the first-grade people took the other side
Of the street when they saw him coming,
With a rag-tag crowd singing and humming,
And curious boys and men up in a perch
Of a tree or window taking the spectacle in,
And the Corybantic din
Of a Salvation Army, as it were.
And whatever he dreamed when he lived in a little town
The intelligent people ignored him, and this is the stir,
And the only stir, he made in the city.

But there was a certain sinister
Fellow who came to him hearing of his renown
And said, "You can be mayor of this city—
We need a man like you for mayor."
And others said, "You'd make a lawyer or a politician—

Look how the people follow you!
Why don't you hire out as a special writer?
You could become a business man, a rhetorician—
You could become a player—
You can grow rich. There's nothing for a fighter
Fighting as you are but to end in ruin."
But he turned from them on his way, pursuing
The dream he had in view.

He had a rich man or two
Who took up with him against the powerful frown
That looked him down.
For you'll always find a rich man or two
To take up with anything—
There are those who want to get into society, or bring
Their riches to a social recognition;
Or ill-formed souls who lack the real patrician
Spirit for life.
But as for him he didn't care, he passed
Where the richness of living was rife;
And like wise Goethe talking to the last
With cab-men rather than with lords,
He sat about the markets and the fountains,
He walked about the country and the mountains,
Took trips upon the lakes and waded fords,
Barefooted; laughing as a young animal
Disports itself amid the festival
Of warm winds, sunshine, summer's carnival—

With laborers, carpenters, seamen
And some loose women.
And certain notable sinners
Gave him dinners.
And he went to weddings, and to places where youth slakes
Its thirst for happiness, and they served him cakes
And wine wherever he went.
And he ate and drank, and spent
His time in feasting and in telling stories,
And singing poems of lilies and of trees—
With crowds of people crowded around his knees—
That searched with lightning secrets hidden
Of life and of life's glories,
Of death and of the soul's way after death.

Time makes amends usually for scandal's breath,
Which touched him to his earthly ruination.
But this city had a Civic Federation,
And a certain social order which intrigues
Through churches, courts, with an endless ramification
Of money and morals to save itself.
And this city had a Bar Association,
Also its Public Efficiency Leagues
For laying honest men upon the shelf
While making private pelf
Secure and free to increase.
And this city had illustrious Pharisees,

And this city had a legion
Of men who make a business of religion—
With eyes one inch apart,
Dark and narrow of heart—
Who give themselves and give the city no peace,
And who are everywhere the best police
For Life as business.
And when they saw this youth
Was telling the truth,
And that his followers were multiplying,
And were going about rejoicing and defying
The social order, and were stirring up
The dregs of discontent in the cup
With the hand of their own happiness,
They saw dynamic mysteries
In the poems of lilies and trees:
Therefore they held him for a felony.

If you will take a kernel of wheat
And first make free
The outer flake, and then pare off the meat
Of edible starch, you'll find at the kernel's core
The life germ. And this young man's words were dim
With blasphemy, sedition at the rim,
Which fired the heads of dreamers like new wine.
But this was just the outward force of him;
For this young man's philosophy was more
Than such external ferment, being divine

With secrets so profound no plummet line
Can altogether sound it. It means growth
Of soul by watching,
And the creation of eyes
Over your mind's eyes to supervise
A clear activity and to ward off sloth.
What he had in mind was scotching
And killing the snake of Hatred, and stripping the glove
From the hand of Hypocrisy, and quenching the fire
Of falsehood and unbrotherly Desire.
What he had in mind was simply Love.

But he was prosecuted
As a rebel, and as a rebel executed—
Right in a public place where all could see.
And his mother watched him hang for the felony
He hated to die, being but thirty-three,
And fearing that his poems might be lost.
And certain members of the Bar Association,
And of the Civic Federation,
And of the League of Public Efficiency,
And a legion
Of men devoted to religion,
With policemen, soldiers, roughs,
Loose women, thieves and toughs,
Came out to see him die;
And hooted at him, giving up the ghost
In great despair and with a fearful cry!

And after him there was a man named Paul
Who almost spoiled it all.

And protozoan things like hypocrites,
And parasitic things who make a food
Of the mysteries of God for earthly power,
Must wonder how before this young man's hour
They lived without his blood
Shed on that day, and which
In red cells is so rich.

Edgar Lee Masters